When Swearing Is More Than Another Dirty Word (Deleted)

By Nancy L. Ross

Like many Americans these days, Dr. Reinhold Aman is busy trying to find out what X equals in the presidential ("eXpletive deleted") transcripts. Unlike those who are doing it mainly for titillation, he is doing it for science—the science of linguistics.

Professor of medieval German literature at the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee), Dr. Aman, 38, has also become an expert on swearing in 50 languages. These range from ancient Greek to Sanskrit, Eskimo to his own native Bavarian dialect.

He hailed the White House tapes as a "fantastic, wonderful new source of swear words," while at the same time expressing disappointment because the transcripts eliminated so many of the choice morsels.

Aman says he finds it possible to reconstruct a number of them by observing adjacent words. For example, the transcript reveals Mr. Nixon called Robert Kennedy a "ruthless" (characterization omitted). According to the linguist, the tape most probably continues with either "sonofabitch" or "bastard" because these are the nouns most commonly used today in combination with that adjective. "In any case," he said, "you know it isn't 'slob,' or a lot of similar slurs, because no one says 'ruthless slob'."

Were he granted access to the tapes—in the interest of preserving profanity for posterity, of course —, Aman might well be disappointed in the presidential lack of inventiveness. To hear White House insiders, Mr. Nixon's brand of profanity is standard, four-letter American.

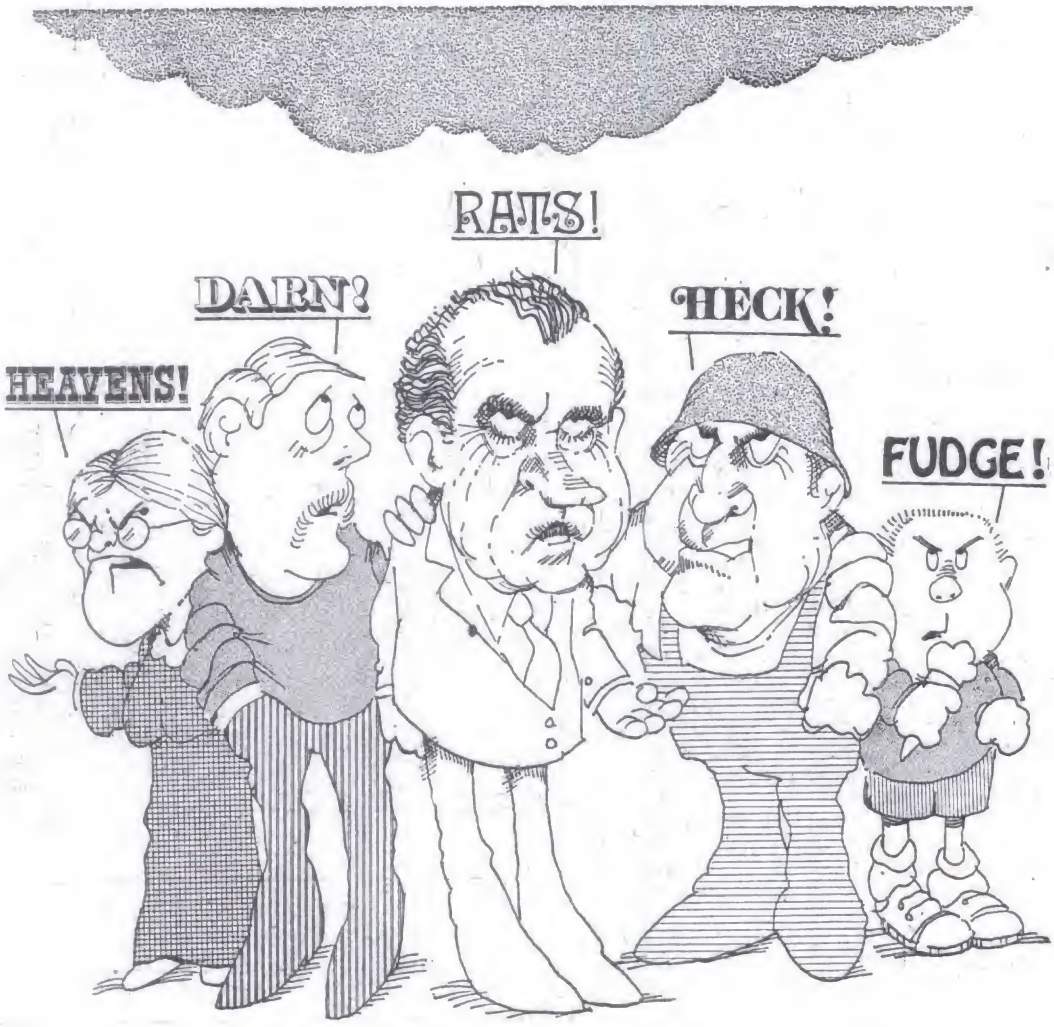
"Americans are generally very poor at swearing," declared the linguist, who can name 250 Bavarian "cuss" words off the top of his head. "They just don't know how. It's primitive. They have a very limited swearing vocabulary. It's almost always one out of 25 words and that's about it."

Aman has found some "good swearing" in the South, Far West and in the backwoods of New England. "But the general American culture is so blah; really, the language is impoverished," he told The Milwaukee Journal.

People swear for a variety of reasons, the most common being sheer frustration. The truck driver does it because his peers expect him to. The te ager aims at shocking parents. The debuta turned revolutionary sees as a form of rebellion. T worst reason, according Washington psychoanal Dr. Michael Maccouby, contempt — a sense of periority over one's riv or enemies. He classi Mr. Nixon's swearing in t category.

Time magazine recer quoted psychologist P Cameron as estimating number of "dirty" words a construction worke speech at 24 per cent, wh as the white-collar pro sional uses only 1 per c in the office, 4 per cen parties. Whatever the son or the amount, st broker and hardhat, r lutionary and President the same words. Advar

See SWEAR, B6, Col. 1



Drawing by John Twohey—The Washington Post

The Art of Swearing

SWEAR, From B1

education or elevated income apparently neither advance nor elevate one's cursing; gutter language is heard in the penthouse as well as the sewer.

Aman first became interested in swearing, academically speaking, about a decade ago. Since then he has studied some 1,200 books and articles on the subject covering a period of 3,000 years. His primary means of discovering profanity in languages he does not know is reading dictionaries. He supplements this study by asking people of various countries and cultures to give him their own dirty words. His findings are due to be published this year under the title "Maledicta: International Bibliography of Pejoration and Verbal Aggression."

Aman declined to state which language, in his opinion, contains the most and/or the most colorful profanity. But he did make these observations in an interview in his office. (Behind his desk a plaque in Gothic script reads: "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I shall fear no evil; for I am the meanest son-of-a-bitch in the valley.")

• Curses reflect the taboos of particular culture: sex, sacrilege and scatology. In addition they deal with animals, tools, physical handicaps and ancestor desecration. In a prudish society like ours—the sexual revolution be (expletive deleted)—obscenity has more impact than in an Indian or Pacific culture. Blasphemy has more shock value in deeply religious countries. Sometimes curses combine several taboos. Consider this Serbian gypsy curse, for example: "May you copulate with the soul of your dead mother."

• The concepts of God and motherhood are the targets of profanity in almost every culture. Apart from these, Aman believes the most universal swear word is "dog." The origin of this term of opprobrium lies in the dogs' practice of eating the bodies of dead soldiers after battles in ancient times. Since they ate fallen heroes as well as enemies, the dogs got the reputation of committing acts of desecration. When it came to English, where "dog" is known as "man's best friend," it took some language juggling to come up with a canine cuss. Hence the use of "bitch" or she-dog.

• Ancient Greek and Latin literature are replete with swear words (by patricians as well as slaves), as is the Bible. Yiddish more than holds its own. Compared to English, Russian is very rich in obscene swear words. German has more profanity referring to a person's excrement and his stupidity. Latin languages have a variety of pejorative suffixes that can change a decent word into a dirty one. But English, in common with German, has no built-in suffix richness and must therefore rely on a limited number of fabricated prefixes. Hence a combination like "s — — — work."

• There are two basic types of swearing: spontaneous, as when you hit your finger with a hammer, and metaphorical, which more properly comes under the heading of the calculated insult. As an example, Aman says that when he sees a certain actor (name deleted) on the TV screen he feels like commenting, "What an (expletive deleted)!" Were he to meet the actor in person he might feel inspired to say, "You amoeba-brained night watchman in a funeral home." (It probably sounds twice as musical in German.)

• Any decent word can be used for swearing. A former pupil of Aman recounts the professor has been known to come out with a thundering "Kaksi kymmenta yhdeksan!" What sounds like the wrath of the Pharoahs descending upon thy house is in reality Finnish for the number 29.

Hindus and Navajo Indians both employ "brother-in-law" as a swear word—often on unsuspecting foreigners who appear flattered until they learn better. Rather than meaning "friend of the family" or something like that, it means, "Your sister has no morals. I slept with your sister, so you and I are brothers-in-law."

On the contrary, some "dirty" words tend to become "laundered" or at least "bleached" through constant usage. The currently faddish American "motherf - - - -" shocks many people. Yet in some segments of society the term is being used as an adjective applied to objects and situations as well as humans, with consequently little more meaning or effect than "damn."

Aman recalls the experience of his wife, a third grade teacher in Milwaukee's inner city. Tired of hearing young boys use the term several times in a sentence when speaking to her, Mrs. Aman pointed out to

the boys they were perpetuating a "technical impossibility." The boys looked bewildered, which convinced the teacher her pupils were simply parroting their elders without knowing what they were saying.

The irony is that the paucity of American swear words leaves frequent users of this expression with little else to shout when they really feel the need to curse. So they wind up using the same word, changing the meaning by changing the inflection of their voices. If this sounds unusual, think of the way in which the tone of the voice determines whether the words "Oh God" are profane or sacred.

Aman would like to "enrich" the American swearing vocabulary, to make it better, if not bigger. To introduce variety, he has written a swearing primer titled "Name Calling Made Easy," which already enjoys brisk sales at his university bookstore.

He also has invented a calendar with a pejorative, but "clean" designation for each day. He sent a copy to the White House last year. Perhaps had it arrived sooner, Mr. Nixon might have looked up at the wall that March 21 and seen the swear word of the day was "nut," not (expletive deleted). Following Aman's system, Colson, Gray, Sirica and others would have come out as zombie, yellow belly, nincompoop, etc. in the transcript not (characterization omitted).

Though he does not advocate swearing, Aman condones it as an emotional safety valve. Better verbal aggression than physical aggression in the Oval Office, he says, as if the President had a real choice between calling X a SOB and belting him across the mouth.

If the German linguist had his druthers, Mr. Nixon's private expletives would sound more like his former Vice President's public profanity. Citing Agnew's phrase "nattering nabobs of negativism" as a "very good way to swear," he added, "Not only did he use good, insulting words, but he had alliteration in there, too."

Despite Agnew's contributions, we Americans still have a long way to go. Aman points to the colorful insulting expressions of the Gbeya tribe of Africa: "Your eyes, that are empty, they are like the eyes of a frog that drowned. Your face is as flabby as the back side of an elephant."